

# Historical inevitability? The regionalisation of Indian politics (Part II)

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/07/11/historical-inevitability-the-regionalisation-of-indian-politics-part-ii/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/07/11/historical-inevitability-the-regionalisation-of-indian-politics-part-ii/)

2012-7-11

*In this two-part interview, LSE's Professor Sumantra Bose puts the regionalisation of the Indian polity in historical perspective. Click [here](#) to read the first part of the interview.*

## **Q. How can we make sense of the Maoist movement in the context of India's regionalising politics?**

**A.** The recent resurgence of Maoism as a radical, insurrectionary challenge to Indian democracy fits into the overall picture of the regionalisation of India's politics. It's important to realise that the Maoist movement is not uniformly spread across India. Since its inception in the late 1960s, the character of the Maoist movement has been crucially shaped by regional contexts and landscapes.

In my forthcoming book, I divide the movement into three generations. The first generation (1967-1972) was shaped by radicals in West Bengal who broke away from the mainstream communist movement. This early movement was dominated by a radical fringe of regional communism in West Bengal and had a limited impact in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. The movement had negligible or no impact anywhere else in India.

The second generation of Indian Maoism evolved in the 1980s in two regional landscapes. The first was central Bihar (now southern Bihar after the erstwhile southern districts of Bihar became the separate state of Jharkhand in late 2000), where an oppressive agrarian order based on caste hierarchies was the norm. Maoist factions were able to organise among predominantly Dalit landless labourers to oppose this order and the feudalistic practices of upper and intermediate caste landed groups. The second regional landscape was hundreds of miles south in Andhra Pradesh, specifically in Telangana, the northern part of Andhra Pradesh. In this area, there were some precedents for ultra-left activity from the late 1940s onwards due to widespread landlord oppression. Here too a regionally specific group of Maoists, organisationally distinct from their Bihar counterparts, were able to mobilise Dalit and tribal landless labourers as well as tribal (Adivasi) communities being harassed and exploited by state forest officials.

The third, early 21st century generation of Maoism, represented by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) formed in late 2004, is a merger of the Bihar/Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh factions of Indian Maoists. It can be said that this generation comprises a federation of regionally distinct Maoist groups. They have gained some support in some of the poorest regions and communities of the country, for example, among Adivasis in the Bastar region of the state of Chhattisgarh. As such, the evolution of the Maoist movement fits into the regional paradigm.

## **Q. You have taken a comparative approach in your academic work, particularly when writing about Kashmir. Is there a comparative movement to the Maoists that offers lessons on how to manage the challenge?**

**A.** The closest analogue is Peru's Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) movement, a radical offshoot of the Peruvian Left that is virtually extinct now but was similar to Indian Maoists in its ideology, modus operandi and aims. From 1982 until the mid-1990s, there was a civil war in Peru because of Shining Path's sustained campaign to overthrow the state. Like the Indian Maoists, Shining Path established bases in remote and extremely poor parts of Peru among marginalised communities such as the highland Quechua-speakers, the Adivasis of Peru, so to speak.

Due to an effective counter-insurgency strategy, Shining Path eventually lost the war against the state quite decisively. The turning point came in the late 1980s and early 1990s when communities initially mobilised by Shining Path in its revolutionary war turned against the movement. Shining Path's extraordinary violence, primarily against ordinary, poor people, led to doubts and eventually disillusionment about Shining Path among these people. Peruvians realised that Shining Path was more oppressive than the state because the group demanded absolute obedience to the movement and unqualified participation in their vision of a totalitarian state.

A similar use of violence backfired against third-generation Maoists in West Bengal, who saw a rapid rise and fall between 2009 and 2011 as they tried to exert absolute authority over rural communities in some parts of West Bengal. As in Peru, the totalitarian character of Indian Maoism could ultimately cause local communities to reject their movement. I think that if counter-insurgency is implemented intelligently, the Maoist problem in India could dissipate in coming years. But that's a big if.



**Q. How does the evolving situation in Kashmir connect with the overall trend of regionalisation in India?**

**A.** Regional patriotic sentiment in Kashmir has been continually estranged from the Indian Union, as embodied by the 'Centre' in New Delhi, for the last six decades, since 1953. For four decades from the early 1950s until the late 1980s, when a home-grown insurgency emerged, the state of Jammu & Kashmir, particularly the region known as the Kashmir Valley, was largely left out of the democratic and federal political development which defined the trajectory of the Indian Union as a whole. By and large, the 'success story' of India's democracy is due to robust multiparty and quasi-federal development in a decentralised political framework. This didn't happen in Jammu & Kashmir, and especially not in the Kashmir Valley, a region with a distinct history, culture and political consciousness. For almost 40 years, from 1953 to 1989, there was not a representative, legitimate government there, with the partial exception of the period from 1977 to 1984.

Much is made of Kashmir's special autonomous status, but that autonomy has been eroded since the mid-1950s by intervention from the 'Centre'. By the mid-1960s, the asymmetric autonomy promised by Article 370 of the Indian Constitution had largely disappeared. It's important to note that autonomy did not breed the urge for secession. To the contrary: the effective revocation of autonomy, the lack of free and fair elections and the foisting of unrepresentative governments, and violations of civil liberties bred feelings of oppression and secessionist desires.

This sense of oppression has been transmitted from generation to generation since the 1950s. The older people in the Valley remember when the autonomous status was effectively revoked and dissent stifled through draconian laws and police methods. All living generations in the Kashmir Valley have witnessed, and in innumerable cases been directly affected by, the horror of insurgency and counter-insurgency that erupted in 1990 and raged for a decade and a half. The 'stone-pelting' generation, consisting mostly of teenaged boys and young men in their twenties, who took to the streets of the Valley between June and September 2010 have grown up in an environment of brutality and violence. This is the latest episode of a long saga of bitter alienation that began sixty years ago.

Kashmiris in the Valley have a strong collective consciousness and an identity based on regional patriotism. That identity and regional patriotism has been estranged from the Indian Union for six decades. The real damage was done between 1953 and 1989 by policies imposed from New Delhi by Congress governments. Now that the 'Centre' has lost its overweening status and India is shaping up as a democratic federation of regional polities, I'm very

cautiously hopeful that perhaps something can be done in the coming years to constructively address the estrangement of this particular regional identity.

*Sumantra Bose is Professor of International and Comparative Politics in LSE's Department of Government.*

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics